

Impressions

by CuriosityRedux

Category: How to Train Your Dragon

Genre: Romance

Language: English

Status: Completed

Published: 2014-06-10 04:24:40

Updated: 2014-06-10 04:24:40

Packaged: 2016-04-26 19:03:25

Rating: T

Chapters: 3

Words: 6,302

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Jane Austen AU: Her wit exhilarates him. His lack of propriety astonishes her. All that stands between them is a ballroom, a proposal, and their pride.

1. Chapter 1

****The Impressions series was birthed by an anonymous prompt sent to my Tumblr account. I'd intended it to just be a drabbly little oneshot, but I enjoyed writing it and others enjoyed reading it, so I expanded it to be sort of a trilogy thing. It's a Regency period AU, Jane Austen style. And I am clearly no Jane Austen, so please just have mercy on me! I hope you enjoy!~****

****First Impressions.****

The Jorgensons' ball had been long anticipated by the citizens of Berk. Ribbons were purchased, dances practiced, and every young lady's best dress mended to perfection. The whisper of potential matches invigorated every daughter's mother within a twenty-mile radius, meaning that every daughter within a twenty-mile radius was subjected to the harsh correction of a well-meaning mother.

Astrid Hofferson was no different. "Can you stand no straighter?" her mother whispered over her shoulder at her as they entered their neighbor's grand home. "Don't lift your chin like that, terrible girl! And would you please for me and your father's sake just smile?"

Astrid executed every command with promptness. Despite her dutiful smile, however, she couldn't help the lack of excitement the sight of well dressed couples failed to inspire. If anything, as her little family approached the hosts' receiving line, dread curled in her throat.

"Mr. Jorgenson," her father greeted the host with a firm handshake. They smiled like old friends and exchanged comments about the

season's hunting fare.

Her mother was next. "Your home is so lovely," she sighed, fluttering her lashes at their surroundings. Indeed, the mansion was splendid. "My Astrid has spoke of nothing but your ball for weeks. Right, darling?"

"Yes, mother," the girl forced, summoning a pleasant demeanor with which to give the tall host a graceful curtsy. Her eyes slid past the imposing man to his son, who was giving her a crooked grin as he adjusted his cravat at his neck. "Mr. Jorgenson."

"Miss Hofferson," Snotlout replied with a nod. "Glad you could come."

"It's our pleasure," Astrid's mother interrupted, attempting to give her daughter an inconspicuous look that unfortunately came off rather conspicuous. "My Astrid just adores dancing."

"Well, then she must save one for me," Snotlout responded, his gaze on Astrid. "I insist."

The corners of her mouth turned up stiffly. "Yes. Of course." And with a tiny pinch on her mother's arm, she prodded the woman forward.

The two argued in quiet whispers as they wandered past elegant ladies and flirting couples. The daughter hissed her displeasure to her mother in clear terms. The mother reminded the girl of her expectations. Astrid had no brothers. It was imperative that she make a match, and it was no secret that the younger Mr. Jorgenson had taken a fancy to her.

They stopped abruptly when they came upon her father in the main ballroom. He was deep in conversation with the largest man Astrid had ever met. Next to her, her mother let out a little squeak and dropped into a low curtsy. A little alarmed, Astrid did the same, lowering her eyes.

"Lord Stoick," Astrid's father began in introduction. "You've met my lovely wife. This is my daughter, Astrid. Astrid, dear, this is Lord Stoick. Mr. Jorgenson's brother-in-law."

The girl blinked up at the lord with wide eyes. He was the closest she'd come to royalty in her eighteen years, and by far the richest man she'd ever had the chance of being introduced to. The man was at least a foot taller than her own father, with thick ginger hair and an equally thick beard streaked with silver. He nodded down at her with kind eyes. "A beautiful young lady," he chuckled with a fatherly smile. "I wish I'd kept track of my own son so that I could introduce you."

"It's my pleasure," she murmured and tried to remember whether or not she was meant to curtsy again. At this rate, she worried for the stamina of her legs.

The two men reengaged in conversation, and with Astrid's mother effectively dazzled by the man's grandeur, the girl took the opportunity to stray. She wandered through rooms and hallways, relaxing as she noticed familiar faces and friends involved with

dancing and general merry-making. The music hired for the evening sounded ethereal and somehow exotic, being played by at least twice the musicians than she'd seen at the Jorgensons' last ball. It must have had something to do with the presence of Lord Stoick, she thought to herself.

She was slipping through one of the back rooms when a blur of color suddenly caught her eye. A young man, slender and tall, peeked in from the mansion's back door before stepping inside. It was curious enough that Astrid stopped to stare.

He was dressed well, as most of the young men were, but this peculiar gentleman's clothes were rumpled and askew. His auburn hair was not pulled or slicked back, but stuck out wild and wind blown. And he had an odd pace to his gait, not quite a limp but almost a pause to each step. Averting her eyes so that the young man didn't catch her staring, Astrid wondered if this stranger had been invited to the ball. A part of her doubted it.

"Excuse me." A voice suddenly appeared by her side, and she jumped. When she turned, the curious gentleman was grinning at her. Up close, she couldn't help but notice that he smelled like the stables—a woody, earthy scent.

"Hello." Her manners flew from her mind, and she was reluctant to retrieve them. If her suspicions were correct, this young man was no more than a servant in his master's clothing. She'd certainly never seen him at any ball before.

"I didn't mean to startle you," the gentleman chuckled, having the good sense to appear a little sheepish. His green eyes crinkled around the edges in a strangely familiar way. "I'm a little turned around. Could you point me toward the main hall?"

Astrid nodded. "Through this way, and then out," she directed, pointing towards the last room she'd exited.

"Ah. Thank you, Miss—".

"Hofferson," she supplied indulgently, inexplicably entertained by the lanky man. He was handsome, but not in the way that her other neighbors' sons were, and his manner was friendly and unassuming.

"Miss Hofferson," he echoed. "Thank you." With that and a nod, he was off in the direction she'd indicated.

She'd chuckled to herself after he left, amused by the entire interaction. It was unusual that the agenda at a ball deterred from dancing and mingling and suppressing her temper at her mother's pleading. For a moment, it almost felt as if that strange gentleman had stepped out of her imagination.

The night continued. She drank sweet punch and avoided her mother. She swapped gossip about the lord's elusive son with Ruffnut Thorston. She even submitted to a dance or two with the young Mr. Jorgenson, managing to escape with most of her toes intact. But as the evening stretched on, she could feel the familiar ennui settling into her bones. Astrid drifted to a quieter room and took up an unoccupied window seat. It was difficult to make out in the dark

outside, but she thought she could make out a handful of horses grazing in the Jorgensons' pastures.

It wasn't long before the voice appeared just as it had the first time. At one moment, she was alone, and then the next, he was there. "Miss Hofferson?"

Astrid glanced up at the young man from earlier. His attire was just slightly more put together, and he'd adopted a more formal posture, but he wore that same nonthreatening grin. "We meet again," he told her, pulling up a chair and sitting a respectful distance from her.

"So it would seem," she replied. In the back of her mind, her mother's voice sharply instructed her to sit straight, but Astrid found she no longer cared. "Are you not enjoying the ball?"

"I've never been one for the more frivolous events," he admitted good naturedly. There was an almost endearing way about the way his shoulders moved when he spoke.

"Frivolous? You think balls are frivolous?" She raised an accusing brow at him. The people were, perhaps, but nothing about being forced into a crushing corset, dragged along like a dog at a show, and dodging thinly veiled insults from female competition felt frivolous to Astrid.

Her companion's expression was innocent. "Is that not the purpose of balls? Fun and frivolity?"

She pursed her lips, giving him a level gaze. "I'm convinced it was men who invented balls to trick women into thinking they were being entertained. All the while, you're evaluating us like race horses." Straightening, she deepened her voice. "Yes, Miss Hofferson does have a lovely stature and fine breeding, but Miss Thorston bears a more pleasant countenance."

He snorted. "Oh, and you females don't? Lining up the men to measure his worth by the weight of his pocket and then setting your rabid mothers on the unfortunate fellow with the heaviest purse."

Astrid attempted to look offended, but amusement played at her lips. "Are you bitter because none of the ladies have asked you to dance, sir? Is your pocket too light for this crowd's taste?"

"What sort of decent young lady asks a young man to dance?" he scoffed. "If anything, you should be bitter that I've yet to ask you to dance."

Before a blush could creep up her cheeks, Astrid sat forward and laced her fingers together. Her mother would be horrified. "Well? Have I need to be bitter?"

His smile was stiff, then, and somehow he looked more handsome than any of the preening peacocks with their starched breeches and perfectly arranged cravats. "Alas," he began with a rueful smirk. Leaning over, he rapped his knuckles against his left pants-leg. It gave a wooden knock. "I'm afraid I'm all right feet."

Astrid glanced down at his shin, wondering devilishly what hid

beneath his breeches. When her eyes rose to meet his, she realized that he was waiting for her to run. She sat back.

"I've heard an awful lot of excuses not to dance with me," she told him teasingly. "But a wooden leg is certainly a first." Astrid pursed her lips against a smile.

"Ah." The young man sat up. "You've found me out."

"Actually, I've yet to." Reaching up tuck a stray curl behind her ear, she crossed her ankles together and pinned him with an accusatory glare. "I've shared my name with you, but you've yet to share yours with me. Is it because you weren't actually invited to this ball?"

His grin turned mischievous. It made her heart flutter pleasantly at her breastbone. "Do you really want to know?" he asked in a lowered tone.

She narrowed her gaze and nodded slowly.

So he told her.

2. Chapter 2

****Wrong Impressions.****

Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III was not much for balls. He disliked the staring crowds littered with purse seekers. He disliked the way that the formal attire restricted his movement, and the deafening music limited conversation. And he very much disliked having to politely refuse each and every dance partner thrown his way.

Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III did not dance.

He did, however, enjoy spending summers traveling with his father. The young man was often plagued by an itch to see more and learn more. There was something about the way a new place looked for the first time from a carriage window or horse's back that filled him with a sense of purpose and fulfillment. That summer, in their travels, Hiccup's father had decided it was time to pay a visit to his brother in law in Berk, where Hiccup had not been for at least a decade.

So they let Slippery Cliffs in Berk, a cozy estate merely a stone's throw from his uncle's own. It was undecided how long they would stay, but of course, because they were staying, someone had proposed a ball.

Hiccup did everything he could to avoid it. He drove his father mad with his excuses not to attend. Since the loss of the boy's leg, Stoick had been lenient with his son. He rarely pushed him to attend social engagements, only occasionally pressed him to make new acquaintances or visit old ones. But his son was coming to the age where Stoick could no longer restrain himself from urging him into marriage. And so, on the subject of attending Spitelout Jorgenson's ball, the man would not be moved.

He hid in the fields until well past dark, riding and exploring his

uncle's land. Hiccup knew his father would be looking for him, knew he'd be expected to parade through a never ending crowd of advantageous marriage seekers and their even more tenacious mothers. He sighed with the excitement of a fish being waved in front of a pack of wild cats, but led his horse to pasture and dismounted.

"Can't be put off any longer, Toothless," he muttered, petting the sleek black stallion's neck. "See you in the morning."

Rearranging his clothing with only the slightest semblance of care, Hiccup climbed the back steps to his uncle's estate and put his hand on the patio doorknob. Light from inside spilled from wide windows, and the sound of music and conversation murmured through the door. He took a breath to steel himself and then peeked inside. Various party-goers were positioned around the room, chatting and sipping at their punch, but none seemed to notice him. Relieved, he ran a hand through his hair and slipped inside.

It quickly occurred to Hiccup that perhaps he should have spent more time studying the layout of his uncle's home than learning the expanse of his acres. He was unsure where he'd entered from, where his father was, or how to get to him. He tried to remember the tour his cousin had apathetically given him the previous evening, but he failed to recall even a bit of the back rooms.

That's when his eyes fell on her—a Miss Hofferson, he learned after asking her for directions. She glowed like some angelic portrait, with porcelain skin and hair that glimmered like precious metals. Her blue eyes stared at him with polite suspicion, but Hiccup couldn't keep from smiling despite himself. After finding his father and receiving a sound scolding for the state of his attire, he meant to begin his usual habit of finding someplace quiet to think. However, after a few moments of wandering, he found himself being pulled back to that back room to see if the young lady remained.

She didn't. There was a flash of disappointment that he quickly stifled, but he didn't allow himself to dwell on it. He passed through a few more crowded rooms, receiving more than one curious glance, but soon decided that it was better off he not find her anyways. In his experience, the ladies fair enough to draw his attention were either already married or politely dull.

And so he set about searching for his quiet space. In a way that seemed almost like fate, when Hiccup located a corner room away from the pressing crowds and deafening music, the lovely Miss Hofferson appeared.

She sat in a window seat, her expression deeply thoughtful. It couldn't be helped—he suppressed a smile at the sight of her. They engaged in light conversation, exchanging a sort of banter that he found surprisingly refreshing. Though she'd seemed like the picture of a fine lady when he'd first laid eyes on her, she slouched against the window and revealed a splendidly acerbic wit. It disarmed him so much that he found himself confessing his crippled state within minutes.

And then, she'd narrowed those pretty blue eyes and accused him of sneaking into his own ball. The thought itself was hilarious, but it revealed what he'd suspected from the beginning—she had no idea

who (or rather, whose son) he was. Half of him savored the anonymity, wanting to spend the rest of his night under the ruse she accused him of. But the other half wanted to surprise her, to catch her off guard. She was bound to discover his identity by the end of the evening, so he grinned and leaned forward.

"Do you really want to know?" he asked, dropping his voice to a whisper as if in confidence.

Her slender fingers, which had been playing absently with a ribbon from her dress, fell still. Her gaze turned scrutinizing, and she nodded. When she did that, her lips pursed just so, and Hiccup found himself almost distracted by the sight. He regained his focus and introduced himself.

"My name is Hiccup Haddock. My father is Lord Stoick of Chiefly Rock."

In the young lady's defense, she did manage to quickly shut her mouth, which had fallen open at his father's name. He couldn't fight back a little chuckle, but his amusement waned when he watched her suddenly straighten. Like she'd been pulled taut by puppet strings, her back straightened, her chin leveled, and she rearranged her position with flushed cheeks. The sincerity in his smile faded.

"I apologize, sir, I didn't realize," she blurted, nodding her head in respect.

Hiccup hesitated, and then held out an uncertain hand. "Please. I was enjoying our conversation. It would please me greatly if we could continue speaking without formalities."

He observed her face as she searched his. The young lady seemed torn between his request and what propriety dictated. Her shoulders relaxed a fraction. "What were we discussing?" she breathed, the shock not yet completely draining from her features.

"Balls," he reminded her, raising his brow encouragingly. "You suggested that men invented them for purchasing purposesâ€"

She winced.

"â€"and I countered that it must have been the females who evaluate the gentlemen as providers and cheque-writers." Hiccup tilted his head and tried to find that wit that had entertained him so much just moments ago. "To which you replied that I was bitter. And I insisted that it was you, Miss Hofferson, the one plagued by bitterness."

The blush didn't fade from her cheeks, but the cutting glint was returning to her gaze. It proved to be an enticing mixture of expressions. "You assured me I've no need to be bitter," she began slowly, her tongue attempting to find traction on the retort. "Because you've merely been saving me the stress of a ratherâ€|_wooden _performance."

Hiccup had to chew on the corner of his lips to hide his mirth from her. Yes, this Miss Hofferson certainly had no trouble stepping on toes. Or lack-thereof.

"Ah. Yes, there was that." He leaned back and stretched an arm over the back of his chair. "Though, it's not the stress of my performance I was sparing you, but the unfortunate heartbreak sure to ensue."

"Oh?" Her eyes widened with feigned naivete. "One dance, and I'm bound to fall in love with you? Is that it?"

"Of course. Why do you think I'm back here?" He gestured up and down his body. "The young ladies can't help themselves around allâ€¦_this_."

Her eyes raked down his figure, and he knew what she saw. A gangly young man in wrinkled breeches, likely covered in horse hair, his wooden leg propped out and stiff. The edges of her mouth curled slightly, though, and he suddenly worried that he'd be the one to break out in a girlish blush.

"Well, if that's your curse, why not marry one of them and end their suffering?" she inquired, her gaze returning to his face.

"Unfortunately, I find myself incapable of returning their sentiments," he sighed with a shrug. "That would be my real curse." For a moment, he considered swallowing the words on the tip of his tongue. They felt almost too genuine, too real for this artificial environment. But the way the young lady observed him, with a shrewdness bereft of judgement or deceit, pressed him into it. "I'll only settle into marriage for love. And of that, I've come to find my relationships considerably lacking."

Her expression turned unreadable. She sat back just slightly. "Yes, I'd suppose that's a luxury someone of your status could afford."

Hiccup blinked, taken aback by the implication of her words. Furrowing his brow with just a little irritation, he gestured at her. "Just who exactly _are _you, Miss Hofferson?" At his question, her lips became tight and displeased. "Your clothing is fine, so you're not impoverished. You hold your own in conversation, so you're not stupid. And I think we can both agree that you are possibly the _least _unattractive of the guests in attendance tonight."

He watched a flash of surprise cross her lovely face. Narrowing his gaze at her, he finished, "So how is it that you remain unmarried, if the fact doesn't remain that _you _are waiting for something as well?"

She seemed indignant. It dawned at him that he was possibly cutting too close to the edge of her patience, but it was her honesty he found himself craving. Her sincerity.

"If I'm correct, Snotlout Jorgenson is a relation of yours."

Hiccup nodded slowly. "My cousin."

The Hofferson girl folded hands on top of her knees in a way that somehow communicated her vexation to him. "I don't mean to be presumptuous, but it's been implied in more ways than one that he means to ask for my hand."

His brows shot up at that. He'd overheard his uncle telling his father about a girl that Snotlout had his eye on, but he'd never have suspected the sharp-tongued Miss Hofferson as the subject of his cousin's interest. Though, after a second look at her obvious beauty and attractive confidence, he could clearly see how she'd earned it. "And? The way you speak, I must infer you don't have strong feelings for him. Will you accept his proposal anyway?"

She suddenly rose to her feet. "If you'll excuse me, sir, I believe I hear my mother calling for me."

She started away, but he stood in protest. "Let's be honest here, Miss. Is this ball for my cousin's evaluation of you, or yours of him? Are you a thoroughbred or a purse chaser?"

His words seemed to crack like a whip against her back—it pulled as straight as an arrow. Turning on her heel, she came to stand just inches from him. The invasion of his personal space was discomfoting, but in a rather exciting way. His pulse quickened.

"You speak of hypocrisies," she hissed through her teeth. "Since mine are so easily spotted, let's delve a little deeper. Humans are all hypocrites anyways, so let's discover yours." Her eyes had gone from calm lakes to hard sapphires, sharp enough to wound. "Is it that you like playing with party guests? Hiding your nobility for the secret pleasure of watching us _common _people make utter asses of ourselves? Or is that you condemn us for our balls and our _frivolity, _free to enjoy the luxury of sitting against the wall and pitying the misfortune of your sex?"

Hiccup found himself tempted to take a step back from her intensity, but she wasn't done. She all but closed the space between them, her contempt filling the last centimeters that separated their chests.

"Or, good sir, is your hypocrisy that you swear off marriage without the condition of love, and yet you skulk away from the dance rooms? Rooms full of girls waiting to be swept off their feet by somebody whose purse they don't have to chase!" Her soft bangs swept into her eyes. The ire that lit her face was oddly exquisite—it she'd turned from an angel to a harpy, and yet he found her no less desirable.

He tried not to glare. "My leg—" "

"Is not as much of an excuse as you'd like it to be, is it?" Her question stabbed through him. "Because yes, you can beg off _dancing _with a wooden leg, but you can't very well use it to avoid falling for a woman who could be eyeing your money, could you? You can protect your pride with it, but not your heart."

With that, she gave him one final, piercing glower and tore away. The soft white fabric of her gown fluttered behind her, and Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III was left gaping in the aftermath of the hurricane that was Astrid Hofferson.

****Lasting Impressions.****

The Hofferson Estate, which had previously been enjoying the quiet contentment of a lazy afternoon, was in a state of chaotic panic. Astrid, having heard her name screeched by her mother, all but stumbled down the stairs in her haste. It was in fact the first time that Mrs. Hofferson had spoken to her daughter in three days, and to hear a note of such acute hysteria in her voice sent Astrid running from her room. Upon finding her mother with her face buried behind the curtains of the window that overlooked the front garden, the girl paused.

"What's happening?" She pushed back her feathery bangs and blinked in alarm. Servants were scurrying around her in haste, and they glanced at her with curious expressions.

Mrs. Hofferson pulled away from the window with a snap and fixed her daughter in a wide-eyed stare. "Tell me you know why Lord Stoick's son just arrived," she demanded, closing the distance between her and her daughter. There was a frantic way to the way she moved, her hands brushing at the girl's dress and pinching her cheeks. "Is he bringing a message from Mr. Jorgenson?"

Astrid's brow slowly furrowed with realization. It'd been over a week since she'd spoken to the young man at the Jorgensons' ball. Or rather, it'd been a week since their conversation exploded into harsh accusations and she'd torn herself from the room in an angry rush. She'd made a specific effort not to encounter him for the remaining duration of the ball, and her attempts had been successful. She couldn't account for the unannounced visit.

"I haven't the impression that they're particularly close," Astrid mumbled. Her mother's fingers picked at her hair. "Stop it! I like my braid."

"Awful child!" the older woman hissed, her voice tight but her eyes pleading. "After what you've done to that family, you can't even summon the decency to put some effort into your appearance? It's _Hiccup Haddock_, for goodness sakes!"

"He's just a man, mother." Her words were absent and distracted as she looked to the window. She waved away her fussing. "Where is he?"

"The stables," the woman answered with a sharp sigh of exasperation. "Byron says he's watering his own horse."

It was all Astrid needed from her. With another annoyed bat at her mother's reaching, she pulled away and crossed the foyer to the front door. Mrs. Hofferson made a sharp noise of confused protest, but the blonde ignored the sound and tugged the door ajar. Shouts of orders to the servants followed her outside.

The day was warm, unusually so for the last weeks of winter. Chickens could be heard clucking from the back yard, and the scent of flora was thick in the air. As the blonde made her way to the stables with something akin to wariness, she pursed her lips in thought. A message from Snotlout Jorgenson would only irritate her and reveal a pathetic side to the man. She'd rather Mr. Haddock have come to endear himself to her, for if she was honest, she'd thought of little but the tall,

easy gentleman since the ball.

But that was unlikely, after the things she'd said to him. Astrid was flushing with both a little embarrassment and a bit of ire as she came upon the stables. She could hear a voice and the nickering of horses.

"- going to ask her to please sit," Hiccup Haddock was saying as Astrid came to peek around the entrance. He'd tied up an unfamiliar black steed to an empty carrel and was patting the beast's side as he paced back and forth. "Then I'll ask her for a word alone- or is that too presumptuous? Ugh, I'm out of practice, Toothless. Anyways, she probably won't speak first- I'll have to come right out and say it."

Astrid watched with fascination and some amusement. The horse was beautiful, a sleek and shimmering creature that exuded power and speed. Currently it was following his rider's jacket pocket, from where Mr. Haddock pulled a piece of carrot. His eyes didn't watch the horse as it gobbled the proffered treat. After consuming his carrot, the steed looked up and pinned her with a pair of exquisite green eyes.

She started, but stepped fully into sight, keeping a hesitant hand on the doorway. The horse- Toothless, he'd called it- nudged the young man with his nose.

"She'll say, 'fine, thank you,'- or maybe not. She never does anything I- would you quit!"

With an annoyed exhale through his nostrils, the beast nibbled at his rider's jacket with a pair of very visible teeth. The irony wasn't lost on her, but she didn't give into the amusement the sight stirred. That caught the man's attention, and his gaze cut to Toothless, who whinnied toward Astrid.

Mr. Haddock's eyes turned to her, widening to see her waiting patiently. She slid her fingers from the wooden door frame and folded her hands in front of her. There was a beat of heavy silence as he shifted on his wooden leg to face her.

"Miss Hofferson," he began, running a hand through his wild hair. "Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon," she greeted likewise. Then she pressed her lips into a thin line, making it clear she wouldn't be the first to speak. He'd been the first to throw an insult, and therefore could be the first to make attempts at resolution.

It was a sick enjoyment she indulged in, watching him squirm and search for words. Then, after a moment, he let his hand drop and said, "I've just come from my uncle's estate."

A strange deflating feeling made her chest go cool. Astrid laced her fingers together and licked her lips, cutting her gaze away. "Might you have a message from your cousin for me, then?"

"No." Mr. Haddock shook his head. "Though I dare say he likely does have a few words for you."

She didn't answer that. She knew.

A painful, awkward silence ensued. Her heart, which had shrunk to hear from whence he'd come, engaged in a warmer, quicker rhythm at his answer. But still, she was resolved not to be the one to speak until she knew the reasons for his coming.

"You..." The young man swallowed, patting Toothless and taking a few steps forward. "You declined his proposal. My cousin's."

She raised a brow. "You think I receive so many that you should feel the need to specify?"

"I came to ask why." His gaze pressed into her with the effectiveness of a physical touch, and Astrid had to resist the urge to shudder. The sun was warm on her back.

Though her mother would have fallen stricken to hear her reply, Astrid could only think to answer with halfhearted hostility. "Is it not enough that I have to endure the label of a capricious flirt because of your family? Must I also be forced to an inspection of my motives?"

"If they have to do with me, yes." A bright heat rose to Astrid's cheeks as she watched him advance. He stopped a respectful distance away, but his eyes still held the enchanting power of a caress across her neck, her shoulders.

At his words, she lost all of hers. "I can't confess to knowing what you mean."

Mr. Haddock's hands flexed at his sides in a tell of nervousness. The little action settled her some, though she still couldn't calm the fluttering of her heart. "At the ball," he began with a swipe of his tongue across his lower lip. "You were... I spoke in an incredibly inappropriate manner, and for that I apologize. There is a certain talent for polite conversation that my family owns, but would easily say that I lack. I've always blurted whatever comes to mind."

She glanced to the floor, finding herself guilty of the exact fault he named. "If it eases your conscience any, your cousin isn't innocent in that aspect either."

He chuckled a little. "No, I would agree with you." There was a humor in his eyes that she suddenly realized she'd been craving. She'd missed the frank, guileless discussion, the honest display of emotion that he seemed incapable of restraining. Something about the way he decided not to value what society deemed right both set her on edge and excited her. She liked that he took her anger and made her want to laugh.

"My behavior aside," he continued, "while I regret having said some of the things I did, if any of them had some impact in affecting your decision to reject my cousin, then-" He cut himself off, and then tried again. "Then I refuse to apologize for them."

Astrid was taken aback. Her eyes widened as she evaluated his serious expression. "You don't blame me for your relative's unhappiness?"

"Not if his happiness would have been at the expense of yours." The young man shook his head. "I spoke to you of my idealistic values, of the notion of love and its necessity in a marriage. It's my weakness, that I seem to make an idiot out of myself at any given opportunity. But you so clearly pointed out my hypocrisies that night, and I don't plan on giving you another example by scorning a decision I indirectly encouraged."

Somehow he had a way of making her want to run in two different directions, to go back to the safe standards dictated by propriety and hide. And to cross the restraining boundaries and step somewhere illuminated by excitement and humor and life. Astrid opened her mouth to say something, but he interrupted.

"And I find I can't allow this to go any further without stating that- that hearing of my cousin's misfortune was the most pleasant event I've experienced since you left my company that night." His face took on an almost pleading expression, a way of asking for something she had no idea of how to provide. "It is my greatest hope that your motives for rejecting my cousin's proposal fail to include a love for someone else. Because after thinking of nothing but you for days on end, I've decided that your love is something I _desperately_ want to earn."

"My love?" The word fell breathlessly from her lips. It was such a far fetched idea, something only whispered about by schoolgirls and romance novelists. It'd been scandalous enough for him to admit his fascination with the thing to her. But to ask her of it? Her pulse skipped.

"Please, allow me to rectify my statement." His fingers curled into fists, and he shut his eyes for a moment before opening them once more. "I can only attest to having felt the love for a father, or a dear friend. I'm unsure that I've ever experienced the kind of love I told you I'm waiting for. But, Miss Hofferson, the girl I spoke to at my uncle's ball- what I feel for her is the closest I've come so far. And if you truly are the person I met that night- that sharp-tongued woman brave enough to expose me of my prejudices and capture a heart I've kept locked up since my accident-" He looked at her with something as light and warm as the sun streaming into the stables. "Then I want her to know that I think I'll find love in her. And if she finds it in me, too, then I'll ask for her hand the very moment she tells me so."

Astrid was stunned. Her hands trembled in front of her, and she lifted one to brush a loose piece of hair behind her ear. Though she'd had to force her gaze away from his because of the sheer intensity of his words, she found herself looking back at his face. It was handsome, honest, endearing in an unusual kind of way. It was the picture of her thoughts for the several nights since she'd seen it last.

"I hope your silence isn't an indication of your apathy for me as well," he half laughed in an attempt at a joke.

For the first time in three days, since she'd turned down the Jorgensons and broken her parents' hearts, Astrid smiled. It was shy and small, but she couldn't suppress it. Her galloping pulse didn't calm, but it was accompanied by a new fluttering that made her dizzy.

"Please." She took a step back and motioned towards the house. She
breathed a little laugh. "Would you care to stay for dinner?"

End
file.